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SUBJECT: LITHUANIA'S PRESIDENT REIGNITES ALLEGED CIA PRISON STORY IN THE PRESS

REF: VILNIUS 487

Classified By: DCM Damian R. Leader for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: After a period in which the story had largely disappeared, Lithuanian media again began writing articles and editorials about the alleged existence of a CIA prison in Lithuania after President Grybauskaite addressed the issue in a press conference October 20 and said she suspected the reports might be true. News articles have been largely factual, and editorials in newspapers with widely divergent views have criticized Grybauskaite for her statements, though for different reasons. The press also reports that the Lithuanian Seimas (parliament) will launch another investigation, after Grybauskaite's criticism that their previous effort had been lax. Comment: Grybauskaite has inexplicably given new life to an unsubstantiated story, reflecting a lack of political seasoning. End summary.

¶2. (U) On October 20, in a televised press conference, President Grybauskaite said the truth is not yet known about whether Lithuania housed a CIA prison reportedly used to detain and interrogate al-Qaeda suspects until late 2005. ABC News first reported the allegation on August 20. Lithuanian media covered the story extensively for several weeks (reftel), but it had largely disappeared from the news, until the presidential press conference revived it. President Grybauskaite also discussed the issue with visiting Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner Thomas Hammarberg, and media also interviewed him and quoted his reactions as well.

¶3. (U) During her press conference, President Grybauskaite said she had suspicions that Lithuania did host a CIA prison, although internal government investigations so far have turned up no proof of that. "I have indirect suspicions," she said. "Not only I, but the international community. When I was traveling abroad and being in Brussels, I only heard one question -- not a doubt about whether they existed in Lithuania but only a question. The West does not doubt it could be true. The question was about Lithuania's reaction and further steps, therefore I do not want us to have any illusions here. Both Lithuania and the United States should give answers to these questions.... If it is true, Lithuania should come clean and take responsibility, apologize and say it would never happen again. Lithuania cannot be put in a situation... where (it) could become a target of international terrorists." She also said, "I only want to say that we should not fear, hide and avoid the topic. The quality of a political system and a democratic country depends on our ability to see and admit our mistakes and avoid them in the future; therefore, this has to be done by both countries: namely, the country that spread the information and the country on the list."

¶4. (U) Grybauskaite said investigations thus far in Lithuania had been halfhearted and thus inconclusive. "So far the investigation in Lithuania is only formal, with only inquiries sent out and nothing more done.... The West will await our answers and look at us with suspicion if Lithuania

fails, in one way or another, to either clear the suspicions or, if it existed, to assume responsibility and apologize to the international community and human rights" community.

¶15. (U) Hammarberg, who was in Vilnius to lead a seminar on tolerance and discrimination issues, said after meeting with Grybauskaite: "We see this as extremely serious because we know that torture was committed in these centers; whether it was here or not still has to be proven. I think this is a serious matter that needs to be clarified. Either it wasn't here, and the name of Lithuania would be cleared, or it was actually here so there is a need of clarifying how this could happen and to take action for this never to be possible in the future." He also called on Lithuania to undertake a more thorough investigation into the issue.

¶16. (U) All major print, broadcast and online news media reported on the president's press conference, which was carried live on national television. Reporting on the alleged CIA prison was generally straightforward and factual, and did not lead the news in either newspaper or TV coverage.

¶17. (U) The two largest daily newspapers editorialized on the topic. Both criticized President Grybauskaite, but from different viewpoints. "Lietuvos Rytas," which often is critical of the president, pointed out that the president had revived questions about the prison even though past and current GOL officials and diplomats had categorically denied its existence in Lithuania. The newspaper said President Grybauskaite's statement "can be evaluated not only as a wish to damage the relationship with the most important ally of Lithuania, but also as tampering with Lithuania's international reputation." "Respublika," the second-largest daily paper known for its nationalist and anti-American views, said that President Grybauskaite's words hinted that the alleged prison could make Lithuania a target of terrorists, but that she lacked the strength to take the next step and say that Lithuanian troops should "be withdrawn from the wars of others in Afghanistan and Iraq" because they also make Lithuania a terrorist target. "Respublika" also criticized the president for what it called her bureaucratic attempt to avoid blame when she said she knew nothing about the alleged prison because she had been living and working in Brussels at that time.

¶18. (U) News media also questioned other officials about the investigation. Arvydas Anusauskas, chairman of the parliament's National Security and Defense Committee, denied that the committee's investigation had been merely a formality, and said the committee was still awaiting answers from various institutions. But deputy committee chairman Vytautas Bogusis said the investigation was never serious. The chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Audronius Azubalis, said his committee and the defense committee continued to work hard, but were stymied. "We have the full authority to make an investigation, but we do not have any hints where to start." Media reported later on October 21 that the defense committee would seek a mandate from the full Seimas to launch a more in-depth probe, which would include the interrogation of private individuals. Anusauskas reportedly said that the committee now was "expecting answers from places that may have information in their possession, namely Swiss senator (and Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Rapporteur on Secret Detentions) Dick Marty (and) U.S. institutions."

¶19. (U) On October 22 the local media extensively covered an updated story from ABC News that reported details of alleged CIA-chartered flights between Afghanistan and Vilnius. Also on October 22, Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius was quoted as saying "it would be best if heads of the U.S. special services gave answers; we hardly can find anything ourselves. Lithuania's leaders of 2005 denied it. I will not make any guesses. The Seimas committee can do the investigation."

¶110. (C) Comment: Grybauskaite's lack of political seasoning may be largely responsible for reviving an aging story that continues to lack substantiation. Rather than help quiet a

story that does not reflect favorably on Lithuania, her comments instead have suggested that there may be a kernel of truth to the allegation, and have reignited a parliamentary investigation that in the end likely will result in another inconclusive finding. The president's comments are all the more puzzling given her concerns about Russian influence in the Lithuanian media, as the story tends to cast doubt on the strength of the U.S.-Lithuanian relationship. By contrast, the prime minister, by his comments, more capably distances himself from a story to which he has no connection. End comment.

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